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Book Reviews

'WITH WHISTLER IN VENICE'

Otto H. Bacher, an American etcher and illustrator of talent, was an art student at Venice when Whistler, his reputation made, was at work there in the early '80s. With other students Bacher met the great man, who immediately took an interest in certain apparatus and examples of the etcher's art that Bacher possessed, and called to see him. An acquaintance and intimacy sprang up which lasted as long as Whistler lived. Mr. Bacher has now written a book called "With Whistler in Venice" (Century Co.), which contains not only the record of the author's acquaintance with Whistler, but a considerable number of reproductions of etchings, sketches and letters of the master's, and some of Mr. Bacher's own.

There is a little bit of the artistic Boswell in this book. Yet not too much. Mr. Bacher seems to have known exactly how to take Whistler and get along with him. He wanted to be treated with a mixture of bluntness and respect. It did not trouble him, apparently, that his young friend, whom he called his pupil, called him "Jimmy." But he exacted a reverent admiration of his art, and an intelligent understanding of it, too.

The occasion of Whistler's first visit to Bacher's studio illustrates his amiability regarding ordinary artistic amenities. It was on a rainy Sunday, and Bacher's room at Venice was crowded full of students, all smoking and some of them howling. There came a faint knock; whereupon some one threw a shoe violently at the door and yelled "Stay out!" But the faint knock was repeated, and Bacher opened the door. It was Whistler. He was smiling broadly, and, when admitted, fraternized genially with the crowd of boys.

In fact, he visited the studio very often. He ate the grub which the boys cooked, and liked to get hold of American dishes. We find him yearning for sweet potatoes, which he could not get at Venice. This is a note of patriotism which we do not often encounter in reminiscences of Whistler.

But he was, of course, quite autocratic. Bacher says his talk was like his etching—it seemed to be bitten in very sharply. When

Bacher put forth some idea of his own Whistler answered: "Bacher, I'm not arguing with you, I'm telling you." Once the boys discovered some picturesque spots on the canal somewhere and went to paint them. But Whistler protested strongly. "When you find a place like this," he said, "you should not paint it yourselves—you should come and tell Whistler." He generally spoke of himself, by the way, as "Whistler," discarding the pronouns "I" and "me." Was not this the ecstasy of egotism?

Whistler boasted to several artists that he had a "secret of drawing," and on one occasion asked Bacher what he would give to have this secret taught him. Bacher replied that he was too poor to purchase the knowledge; but he says now, and doubtless believed at the time, that Whistler had no secret of drawing.

But in any case he had industry. Bacher says that in Venice Whistler sometimes began an etching at 7 o'clock in the morning and continued until 9. Then he would put that plate aside and take up another until 12. After a mere bite of luncheon he would begin a third task, sometimes an etching and sometimes a pastel, and then take up a fourth—his final subject for the day—and continue until dusk. The subjects were always wholly different. He always had a half dozen plates under way at the same time.

The illustrations in this volume are extremely interesting, especially to artists, for they show some of Whistler's most characteristic work in every possible stage of advancement. And the book is beautifully printed and bound.

Whistler is a much greater artist for artists than he is for the laity. Indeed, his contempt for the ordinary understanding was so thorough that he can never by any possibility be ranked among the world's greatest artists. The duty of being understood is one which genius graciously acknowledges. But to the student, to the connoisseur, Whistler's works and methods were amazingly declaratory; they offer brilliant solutions of the chief problems that confront the brush, the pencil, the graver. Mr. Bacher's book is admirably valuable in presenting the very life and illustrating the achievement of this extraordinary man.